

## **Negotiating South Asian Lesbian Space in Sj Sindu's *Marriage Full of Lies***

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**Article History:** Submitted-13/06/2021, Revised-01/08/2021, Accepted-04/08/2021, Published-31/08/2021.

### **Abstract:**

Gradual coming out of the queer community all around the world is a necessary and welcome revolution. They are facing their share of hatred in the process, but what makes their journey unique is their cultural setting. The paper aims to highlight the struggles of a South Asian lesbian in settings both of home and host land and her journey of self-acceptance. The novel will be analyzed in the backdrop of concept of space, cross-cultural connections of diaspora, queer theory, myth and feminism. Dialogues indicating heteronormativity, diaspora, feminism will be carefully collected and analyzed in the paper to answer the statements of problem of the study.

**Keywords- Queer, Culture, South Asian, Lesbian, Cross Cultural, Diaspora, Myth, History, Feminism.**

The queer community is gradually unveiling and accepting their identity all over the world after having faced their share of hate and criticism resulting from the heteronormative thought of the society. Although the acceptance rate in the western countries maybe more, South Asian countries still couldn't free itself from the patriarchal and heteronormative prejudices. The society of South Asia is still very much dominated by male, and lives the patriarchal way, where heterosexuality is normalized, and the otherwise is not accepted.

The impact of social happenings trickles down to literature as well. Writing about the queer is not a new phenomenon. famous writers like Oscar Wilde, James Baldwin, E.M Forster, Virginia Woolf, Alice Walker had adopted queerness as a muted theme. Closer to home, due to the conservativeness of the society, the themes of homosexuality were not overtly coming forward till writers like Mahesh Dattani, Ishmat Chughtai, Shyam Selvadurai came up. With

the growing awareness of people and decriminalizing homosexuality by Indian courts in 2017, many writers have started writing their stories.

S.J. Sindu is a budding Sri Lankan American novelist and also a short story writer. *Marriage Of A Thousand Lies* (2017) was her first novel published by Soho Press in June 2017. The novel has earned many awards like Publishing Triangle Edmund White award for debut fiction, and was also named an American Library Association Stonewall Honour Book. Her work has been published in *Brevity*, *The Normal School*, *The Los Angeles Review of Books*, *apt*, *Vinyl Poetry*, *PRISM International*, *VIDA*, *Black Girl Dangerous*, *rkvry quarterly*, and elsewhere. Sindu was a 2013 Lambda Literary Fellow, holds an MA from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, and a PhD in Creative Writing from Florida State University. She currently teaches Creative Writing at University of Toronto Scarborough.

Sindu identifies herself to the community of South Asian Lesbian, thus this novel has a piece of her in it. Thus, the experiences of Lucky maybe said to have a tinge of what Sindu may have gone through personally, both as a diasporic and as a lesbian. In an interview to NBC News, she talks about these experiences and dilemma that she faced as both: "That's the big hurdle for a lot of people. The arranged marriage process seems antiquated and strange. And on top of that, for straight people the process of coming out seems like once you are out, you are out to everyone, which is just not how it works."

She recollects her journey from immigration, racism to her subsequent empowerment as a coloured lesbian:

I think the immigrant experience is a tough one and it's really hard to leave your community behind. I'm really lucky in that I can move in and out of both Sri Lankan and American communities. But for someone of my parents' generation, it's harder.

In Massachusetts, I didn't really feel my skin overtly. In South Dakota, it was out in the open. I used this experience to shape how [my character] Lucky feels about her body. What the Midwest did was radicalize me. It was easy to be complacent in liberal Massachusetts and then I realized how tenuous it all is. Nebraska in 2005, when I moved to college, was very homophobic and very transphobic. But at the same time, there was this sense of radical acceptance within Nebraska's queer and activist community that I had never felt before. (Sindu)

SJ Sindu's novel *A Marriage of A Thousand Lies* (2017) is based on a couple Lucky and Kris, who both have homosexual leanings. Although obviously not happy in the marriage, the couple puts up a brilliant show of a perfect couple to their conservative Sri Lankan – American Families.

Lucky seems to be fine with this pretense but soon the circumstances bring her to her childhood home, when her childhood best friend, who is also her first love interest, Nisha who is planning to get married in an arranged marriage set up. Lucky is perfectly putting up a good show of a perfect wife in the perfect couple with Kris. She realizes her love for Nisha, a girl and this paves the course of the novel in which she is trying to digest her love interest Nisha's Arranged marriage. In her case, both she and her husband are homosexuals but perfectly let each other be in their private spaces, whilst conforming to their Sri Lankan- American standards. Both of them help each other look 'normal' and perfect as Kris can be seen telling Lucky "because of me you can seem like a perfect little brown wife" (Sindu 41). This façade that Lucky wears, gradually comes heavy for her and she decides to stop lying to herself as much as she lies to others.

Sindu's narrative puts light on the strict cultural norms define and differentiate between expressions of love and fidelity and how the queer community, especially South Asian queer community negotiate with it. Apart from Lucky, Kris and Nisha, the other characters can be seen as perfectly juggling between the traditional roles and their personal desires. Lucky's mother and sister live quite outside the traditional south Asian female roles. Lucky takes her own time to step out of the closet due to these family struggles to be the better pretender.

Although the novel flows in first person narration which helps to highlight Lucky's attempts to fit in, Sindhu doesn't give us much glance about the internal workings of Lucky's mind. Undoubtedly, she makes attempts but there is no detailed working of her mind provided to the readers. Lucky is seen asking herself questions, as if holding an internal dialogue to finally decide upon something "What do you want" "what do you want me to do" (Sindu 32). These questions are rather something that she asks to herself. We get to see her true mindset only after a decade of staying in the closet. Actually, it may also be said that it is a product of Sindu's attempt to show, not to tell, i.e, let Lucky, through her experiences convey to her readers, who will draw out their own conclusions and interpretations.

In a very symbolic passage in the novel, the concept of closet for the queer community is neatly defined: "Most people think the closet is a small room. They think you can touch the

walls, touch the door, turn the handle, and walk free. But when you're inside it, the closet is vast. No walls, no door, just empty darkness stretching the length of the world". (Sindu 23). This not just highlights the queer community's dilemma of coming out to others, but also coming out and accepting their own self. The closet becomes a symbol of the self-imposed boundaries one puts on themselves. The concept of place and space is very important to identity as Taylor (1997) suggests, identity is not just about you are but where you are. In the host land, the 'space for lesbians' and gays' are usually viewed and constructed as white spaces due to the stereotypical representations of South Asians or Non-whites or the South Asian's become marginal stakeholders in these spaces; and back home, there is no space at all.

The new way of gender and sexuality combined with ethnicity can give another version of ethnicities and help us break stereotypes, something that is less recognized in the academic literature in this field. These women, or the entire community has the power and energy to reshape alternative South Asian spaces where the joys and pleasure of the family are framed outside the heterosexual matrix (Butler 1997) and overcoming the planned invisibility of racialized communities.

This social exclusion brings Lucky and Kris together. The two are distant yet spiteful of each other, they still become companions in a loveless union to appear to their South Asian families as a perfect heterosexual pair. They provide each other with the acceptance which no one could provide. In places like gay bars, rugby fields they feel more at home than their home itself. Thus, there is open expression of their truer selves. – sexuality, frustration coming from gender roles expected of them and the blatant sexism of their culture.

This marriage, fit the complexities of their identities and in such a way that they could live within the community keeping them satisfied and also having a small share of their real selves to themselves. Although the marriage may be seen as something that hinders their path to complete realizations of themselves. This double life which the queer characters are forced to live almost pushes them over the edge.

Marriage is a big concern when it comes to South Asian families. Lucky finds Chris which helps them follow their homosexual leanings in their private spaces. But Nisha's parents are violently oppressive of their daughter and an undercurrent of passive aggression can also be seen in Lucky's mother, who is disapproving of Lucky's lack of femininity and is anxiously trying to fit her daughter in the community. After marrying a man, Lucky is forced to consider having a baby with Kris, which she almost agrees to, owing to the amount of pressure on her.

All this is but an attempt to make her daughter fit in the space meant for her – where acting feminine, getting married on time, having children are important pre requisites.

The idea of marriage is just of a heterosexual marriage, characters are supposedly modern though they sport outdated and false ideas regarding many issues like marriage, homosexuality, relationships. They shrug at the mention of heterosexuality and seen it to be something which we can outgrow.

It is very much natural that in this environment of highly cultural expectation of family and duty. Lucky Chris and Nisha have to hide their realities and find alternative secretive space to express their real selves. They are constantly under pressure to behave as good brown people they get married and everything is forgiven. Especially the woman is very much controlled by the outside forces; from clothing to her favourite coffee, it is not like her choice. The amount of control exerted by outside forces is evident in these lines:

Let me tell you something about being brown like me: your story is already written for you. Your free will, your love, your failure, all of it scratched into the cosmos before you're even born. My mother calls it fate, the story written on your head by the stars, by the gods, never by you. Everyone is watching you, all the time, praising you when you abide by your directives, waiting until you screw up. And you will screw up.

I coasted by for longer than most people. Most stray early, dating in high school or wearing the wrong clothes, maybe piercing something they shouldn't, drinking like hell in college. But then they shape up, put on a suit and go to their big-kid jobs in the swanky part of town, play middle management at biotech and engineering firms, or go to med school. They get married to other brown people and pop out some brown kids, buy a nice cookie-cutter house and everything is forgiven. As long as you follow your directives in the end, no matter how many lies you have to tell. But here's the truth: I'm still lying. (Sindu 15)

The couple Nisha and Lucky are desperately in love but can't stay together they love doesn't fit them heteronormative society. Nisha wishes Lucky was a boy fantasizes a happy ending with her. The marriage is nothing but a compulsion to her she prays away out of her marriage (62). They can always make a choice but it is impossible to make it this choice could cause them their families thus end in seclusion.

Her slow process of coming out is facilitated by initials old schoolmates, the rugby players the symbolic parallel that it draws between Lucky's progress in rugby and her acceptance towards her sexuality, to let go or hold on to things that she actually loves is brilliant. Lucky's usual passivity can be seen turned upside down in her head on sport like rugby. The Culture which she belongs to is obsessed with femininity and how it should be adhered to, which makes her uncomfortable. Lucky's discomfort can be seen in her firm resolve to not wear heavy sarees or jewellery. As Sindu in interview confirms this that "She feels masculine of center, and she feels [and experiences] her body as masculine". She also adds that she may imagine Lucky coming out as nonbinary and gender queer in future. In many ways, Lucky tries to hint at this latent masculinity in the novel. She sees herself as a bride groom instead of a bride, which highlights her wish to be a man so that she could easily fit into the strictly heteronormative culture. Many gay and queer emblems are scattered throughout the novel, for example, rainbows throughout the scenes with rugby players. Although we might sense homosexual overtones in the portrayal of a group of adult women who still share a college house, but it is not confirmed by the author.

Mythology is an important part in any South Asian diasporic person's life. S/he carries with him the stories of mythological figures and often relates them to the course of their lives. In the first phase of Indian diaspora, Ramayana became huge part of connection for the Indians as they related Lord Rama's exile to theirs. The protagonist Lakshmi ponders over the background of her name:

"I am named after a Hindu goddess sometimes pictured massaging her husband's shins as he sleeps. Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth and beauty, but I wasn't born into either one. Every time Lakshmi's husband Vishnu takes a human form, she does too. But sometimes Vishnu incarnates as a woman, usually in order to seduce men. And then what does Lakshmi do? Sit up in heaven and try not to watch? Or maybe she does, maybe she finds herself drawn to his new soft curves. Maybe she wants to unwrap him and fit her hand into the fold of his waist" (Sindu 53)

Not just she gives the western audience a taste of Hindu mythology, but she also adds her own twist to it with her homosexual musings. She, by reading homosexuality in the mythology of a culture which shuns it, tries to prove a point that gender fluidity has been there around and is acceptable. Another instance from the past that she quotes is that of the existence of Devadasis and the freedom that they had.

These devdasis enjoyed the privileges of a married woman in society but answered to no man. They weren't expected to remain chaste or give up their careers to become housewives.

In ancient India, devdasis were a revered and respected part of temple tradition. But the British saw the practice of women trained in the arts, free to take on lovers, as prostitution. For many years after that, dancing was considered shameful in Indian culture. It's only lately that Bharatanatyam has seen a revival. If Nisha and I were devdasis back then, back before the British, we might have been free. I could pray, but here's the truth: even if the gods are real, I don't think they can liberate us. (Sindu 57)

Had our society been as liberal as it was in those days, it wouldn't have come in the way of union of the lovers- Nisha and Lakshmi.

"You don't have to get married." She draws back and looks at my face. The light glints off her blue contacts. "Of course, I have to," she says. "I meant I miss not having to pretend." I see the woman from before, the one with the flat-billed hat, over Nisha's shoulder. She smiles, and jerks her head toward the exit. "If you get married," I say, "you'll have to pretend forever. (Sindu 65)

Thus, as aptly as the title of the novel conveys, the heterosexual marriage setup is actually a lie, a pretence for the queer. Marriage is loaded upon them; homosexuality is treated as a phase and something that one can definitely grow out of. Sindu also quotes a Tamil saying in the novel – "There's a saying in Tamil that a thousand lies can make a marriage. Here's the truth: I'm tired of lying" (Sindu 203), where in eventually after going through her journey of self-acceptance she realises that she can no longer do this. "Pretending is better than the alternative" (Sindu 66). They find it easier to just push themselves to fit in the mould of conventions than to fight it, as it would cost them everything that matters to them because no matter how hard they try, it isn't possible for them to have a real life together.

It can be seen that how the women are much at peace and more of themselves when they are not in the home land. The homeland ties them up in conventions, whereas the diasporic setting liberates them. They can express their love more freely, or in its entirety in America, where as sneaking out kind of a romance is their only getaway in familial circles of Srilanka. They are free from any judgement and controlling and policing here.

“This town smells like Sri Lanka,” I say. Back when we used to visit, back when my family was still whole. We flew back tanned and complicated, split between missing the blue warmth and grateful to leave all the soldiers behind. Nisha scrunches up her nose and picks out a bag of Tostitos. “It does. But no one knows us here.” (Sindu 106)

They may seem to enjoy a utopic lesbian romance, but they are aware of the ground reality. They cannot have future together. Their endeavour to be together will be an endless battle which Nisha doesn't want to fight.

“Why can't you be like them?” I ask. She draws circles in the sand. “We're not like them. We have to think about our families. If we lived like them, we'd lose everything.” I feel sick with chips and beer. My skin sticks with humidity. Nisha pushes her fingers down and buries her hand. “I don't want to spend my life fighting a war I can't win.” (Sindu 107)

Interestingly, a major thing that can be noted is that queer is essentially often seen as a western concept. It seems as South Asian and Queer can't fit in the same sentence for the Americans. It seems that there are queers from the west, and then there is the unimaginable species of 'South Asian Queer' (Sindu 108) as Kris is referred to in the novel by the Americans. Due to the stereotypical representation of South Asians being a homosexual is construed as a liberal ideology of the west, which the south Asians are too orthodox to even follow; let alone accepting it as an identity. The characters are often seen denying and imposing this generalisation at the same time:

““What?” Tim stood up straight. “Isn't that how you guys do it?” I opened the door. He crossed the room and closed it. He put his elbow on the door near my head. I could smell his sweat. “You're Indian and gay.” He turned toward the room of people. Some laughed. “How does that work out?” “It works just fine,” I said. (Sindu 114)

On one hand, we can see Kris denying this stereotype, Nisha accepts this generalisation, that they cannot be “like them” (Sindu 107) clearly referring to the western homosexual community, and also stating the futility of the attempts to fight for being together.

The South Asian homosexuals view themselves as 'on the margins of both communities' – the heterosexual and the white. They experience their exclusion from both the Asian – American world and as gay lesbian American. In her essay, *'Inclusion, Exclusion and Occlusion: The Queer Idea Asian Pacific Americanness'* Gay activist Urvashi Vaid cites



Takagi as she recounts the time, she took to come terms with her Indian/south Asian background finding a sense of community in the racial political circle. Her identity as a lesbian, often puts her in adversarial position with community back in India; as she didn't find it possible to be actively out in both the places. Gayatri Gopinath, Martin Manalansan, Chandan Reddy demonstrate the various ways in which diaspora shapes the sexuality and influences the mobility of diasporic individual.

Their fears are proven true when their cover is blown. None of the two parents accept their daughters' sexual orientation. Though in the end, Lucky and Nisha do not end up together, but Lucky sheds her mask of heteronormativity and comes out of the closet. Her Amma, after exhibiting her share of denial, self-blame and being wary about her daughter's choice, finally accepts her. In a heart-to-heart conversation between the mother and the daughter about love and life, it is clear that Lucky's mother just wants her to be happy:

“I want to be me.” She stops stroking the kitten's fur. “Can you be happy like this? What would your life look like?” Like an apartment in Cambridge, a job and a kitten and midnight walk with a girlfriend. Like dancing at Machine with the rugby girls. Like short hair. Like looking in the mirror and never worrying about a stranger looking back” (Sindu 208)

The world around her doesn't change, but she is finally at peace with herself as she has taken down the cloak of societal expectations from her. This is going to be fresh start for her.

My wedding photo laughs at me from the wall. I take the frame off its nail, slip out the print, and take it outside to the garden. Cold wind blows from the north. More snow coming, but after, the trees will bud and Amma will plant the garden anew. I dig with my hands and bury the picture deep in the earth. (Sindu 210)

The society has its own way to regulate and seize an individual's right to choose for their life. Although the paper highlights the queer struggle, but we can see the impact of it on a heterosexual's life as well. Often, scriptures and historic texts are used as a reference to control lives, that too differently for both men and women, exposing the double standards of the society:

In Hinduism, the concept of dharma outlines the way you behave—the law of the universe, the amalgam of duties you hold as a sentient being made of stardust and god. The straight and narrow path. The right path. Dharma is the reason that people like Kris

get married to people like me, the reason that Shyama gave up writing for graduate school, the reason that after the divorce, Amma is shunned at Sri Lankan gatherings while Appa is received with open arms. (Sindu 71)

Not just the queer characters, but even the other characters like Amma and Vidya let go of all the burden of society towards the end. Vidya after meeting Lucky admits that she is freer and happier now and has made her choice to live that way and has no plan to go back to her old way of living. Thus, basing its idea on homosexuality and its acceptance in South Asian society, Sindu also touches upon various instances of gender bias and liberation. It can be noted that nothing in the outside changes; but a lot changes inside the characters – Lucky and Kris are free of the false marriage, Vidya is free, Amma is more accepting of all of it, thus living an easier life.

Creating a space for Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual South Asian can be seen as an instance of what Hall would have been viewed as a moving from being objects in the center and redefining space from their new position new position, that is subject. Lucky successfully accepts and fits into her space; she is not looking for a public acknowledgement. She is at peace with what she has now, and thus, she has successfully negotiated her space in both the places of her belonging.

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